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/To Die in San Hilario (2005)"**

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Date of deposit	10.05.2013
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Citation for published version	BENTLEY, BERNARD P. E. (2012). "The 'Ars vivendi' of Laura Mañà's <i>Morir en San Hilario</i> /To Die in San Hilario (2005)". <i>Studies in European Cinema</i> , 9(1): pp7-22
Link to published version	http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/seci.9.1.7_1

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The 'Ars vivendi' of Laura Mañà's

Morir en San Hilario/To Die in San Hilario (2005)

ABSTRACT

*Over the past decade Spanish-language cinema has established itself beside Spanish and Latin American cinema, and *Morir en San Hilario* is a good example of these new flexible collaborations rather than strict transnational co-productions. Billed as a comedy, the film could also be described as a variation on the road film, a circular journey to utopia, a Spanish village/pueblo film and a twenty-first-century 'Ars moriendi' developing the topos of homo viator. This is not a frequent combination to be found on cinema screens, and Laura Mañà's gamble was to integrate all these ingredients and create a fable which reflects on life and death. She does this through comedy, exaggerations, parody and a narrative style identified as magic realism. Her originality, however, overlaps with the lasting legacy of the fifteenth-century Castilian soldier-poet Jorge Manrique (c. 1440–1479) and his 'Stanzas Written upon the Death of His Father', a landmark of Spanish literature.*

[Author's note: *Studies in European Cinema's* editorial policy is to publish quotations in English, if necessary placing original quotations in footnotes.

Keywords - Laura Mañà - *Morir en San Hilario* - road film - *homo viator*
- Jorge Manrique - meditation on death - magical realism

On 15 August 2006, *The Observer* film critic wrote,

Laura Mañà's *To Die in San Hilario* is a heavy-handed Spanish comedy in which the inhabitants of an impoverished small town, famous for its beautiful cemetery, prepare to receive a rich, elderly painter who plans to be buried there. Unfortunately, he croaks on the train two stations up the line and, through a series of misunderstandings, his place is taken by a fugitive gangster with a sackful of loot. The costumes and the steam train suggest the setting is some time between 1930 and 1970, but there's no hint of anything troubling going on elsewhere in the country.

(French 2006: n.p., original formatting)

This was the week of the film's UK release when a similar review was published in *The Guardian* two days previously (Bradshaw 2006: n.p.), but there is much more to this film than being a Spanish comedy, whether failed or not. The film actually transcends national boundaries and specificities through its locations, collaborators and the issues it raises.¹ It also transcends genres and could be described as a variation on the road film, a circular journey to Utopia, a Spanish village/pueblo film and a twenty-

¹ This film is an excellent example of Spanish-language cinema/*Cine en Español*, as identified in Bentley (2008: 313–14, 349–51). For the production details of this Spanish-language film funded by Spanish organizations and filmed in north-west Argentina, see Jaafar (2006: 82), and IMDb title: *Morir en San Hilario*.

first-century 'Ars moriendi'. This contribution aims to go one step further and suggest how Laura Mañà presents her spectators with an original fable and meditation based on traditional reflections on the human condition.

As a genre the 'road film' needs no introduction, but one can be found in the work of Laderman (2002: 1–42). The 'pueblo' or village film, however, is important to Spanish cinema as a recurring location significant for its spectators because the rural setting also functions as a psychological space, usually characterized by stubborn traditional and conservative values. In Spain the pueblo film has acquired generic status and under this label can be found melodramas, thrillers, horror and mostly comedies from the 1960s and early 1970s (Bentley 2008: 11–13, 39–40, 231–32, 337–38); it has currently a strong nostalgic appeal, as evoked in recent Almodóvar's films like *Volver/To Return* (2006). Integrated into the pueblo film and its values is the comic stereotype of the 'paleta', the country bumpkin, usually contrasted with the more sophisticated city dweller (Bentley 2008: 144–45, 168–69, 203–04). The 'Ars moriendi', on the other hand, is a topic that flourished in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe to provide advice on dying well (see for instance Eire 1995: 24–34). Death and, by implication, the purpose of life are the two major existential questions for which world religions have attempted to provide comforting answers. These themes have also been recently explored in Spanish cinema, for instance by Isabel Coixet in *My Life Without Me* (2003) or Alejandro Amenábar's *Mar adentro/The Sea Within* (2004). The bold stroke of the director and screenwriter Laura Mañà was to explore the themes through a fable that exploits comedy, parody and a narrative style, or rather mode, identified as magic realism: 'In the magical realism text [...] the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it *is* an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism' (Zamora and Faris 1995: 3, original emphasis).

The brief pre-credit sequence introduces all the above directly with a close-up on the chairman of a village council, meeting in a hall in an unspecified location in the second quarter of the twentieth century – nothing more can be identified. The council is delighted that it has, after ten years without, received a written booking for one of its famous funeral celebrations from an ageing painter, Germán Cortés (Italo Damiano), who intends to die on 25 October and wants to be buried on the 26. The council chairman, who is the village doctor (Ulises Dumont), subsequently clarifies that people no longer anticipate death the way they use to: they now prefer home, accident and life insurance, perhaps make arrangements with a funeral parlour for their last rite and then place thoughts of their own mortality out of mind, avoiding to recall the inevitable, in order to get on with their daily minutiae and commitments (see for instance Ariès 1977: ch. 6). It is for this reason that the village's economy has been in decline and, with no customers during the decade, the residents are now lacking confidence to organize another of their unforgettable celebrations. It is repeated later on a few occasions that the village, or small town, grew around a cemetery in a plain that cannot be located on any map, or the map in any country or continent. The predominant accents may be Argentine, but there are important Spanish voices in the village, for instance the

two central characters el Piernas (Lluís Homar) or Esther (Ana Fernández), and Cándido the carpenter (Eric Bonicatto) does not hide his French intonation. The October ceremony may evoke the autumn to some, so does the landscape and vegetation, but if it were meant to be Argentina rather than an unspecified location, the trees would be covered with their spring blossom. Mañà has preferred the objective correlative of the end of the natural annual cycle and to emphasize this poetic trope in order to locate her fable through the pathetic fallacy.

After the contextualizing prologue there follows the initial credits with the title at first projected above a steam train travelling across a vast plain bordered in the far distance by high mountains (Figure 1). Following the discussion on death as an irrevocable fact of life, this credit sequence brings to mind the road film journey as a metaphor for the journey of life, which is here circular, opening and concluding in the village which is literally nowhere, a utopia. This 'nowhere' is first humorously presented and confirmed when the villagers congregate on the side of the railway tracks holding up a portable station sign 'San Hilario' below a clock, that has stopped at noon and is mounted on a telegraph pole, in order to halt the train. The town is not on the map because, as explained by the endearing 'paleta' Teodoro (Ferrán Rañé), it is just a cemetery.² To come to the village willingly, rather than fortuitously like the fugitive gangster el Piernas (Lluís Homar), is to accept one's mortality as part of the natural cycle and not with the painful or sorrowful anticipation that it is the negation of life. The train journey and the forthcoming deaths are, in fact, the two topics that are repeated and clearly emphasized by the original trailer included on the DVD release.



Figure 1 – Title.

² For the factual record there is a town of San Hilario in the Province of Formosa in northern Argentina which, according to the Wikipedia, had 630 inhabitants in 1991. There was also a Saint Hilarius, Pope from 461 to 468.

The Journey, evoked by the steam train's progress below the title shot, is a familiar metaphor for Life which has had important oral, visual and written universal manifestations, and is probably part of the collective subconscious.³ Each individual is seen as a traveller or pilgrim on the journey of life, a stranger in exile, *homo viator* (Holloway 1987: 5–6). Two cinematographic examples representing this topos, albeit separated by half a century, could be *Det Sjunde Insegle*/*The Seventh Seal* (Bergman 1957) and *Niwemang/Half Moon* (Ghobadi 2006). *La Strada/The Road* (Fellini 1954) could also be included although not so closely focused on coming to terms with death as with one's own potential or limitations starting and concluding by the sea, like *Morte a Venezia/Death in Venice* (Visconti 1971) or Bertrand Blier's most recent film *Le Bruit des glaçons/The Clink of Ice* (2010). Life as a path is a topos shared by many cultural traditions and is universal, in no way limited to the western tradition. However, to remain close to the present context and by way of limited examples, one can recall, starting with the Classical tradition, Seneca's letter 'De brevitate vitae':

Even as conversation or reading or deep meditation on some subject beguiles the traveller, and he finds that he has reached the end of his journey before he was aware that he was approaching it, just so with this unceasing and most swift journey of life, which we make at the same pace whether waking or sleeping; those who are engrossed become aware of it only at the end.

(Basore 1932: 315)

Or one can recall the ironical formulation from Juvenal's *Satire* 10:

Though you're carrying only a few cups of plain silver when you set out on a journey at night, you'll be terrified of swords and sticks, and you'll panic at the twitch of a reed's shadow in the moonlight. A traveller who is empty-handed can sing in the mugger's face.

(Braund 2004: 367–69)

There are also plenty of examples from the Hebrew tradition. Quoting from the King James version, Cain was cursed 'a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth' (Genesis 4:12), the Psalmist sings, 'I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were' (Psalm 39:12) and David expands, 'For we are all strangers before thee, and sojourners as were all our fathers: our days on earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding' (I Chronicles 29:15), or 'For the good man is not at home, he is gone a long journey' (Proverbs 7:19). The topos was adopted by the Christian tradition. For instance Hebrews 11:9–16 is a gloss on Genesis 23:4, Matthew 7:13–14 develops the topos of the gates at the end of each of the two mutually exclusive paths evoked by Jeremiah 21:8 and it was John's Gospel that

³ Surprisingly, a monograph that explores this important universal tradition is still to be identified as a single reference, hence this rather lengthy introduction. From the perspective of Christianity complementary definitions can be found, for instance, in the works of Holloway (1987: 1–18) and Edwards (2005: 11–23, 205–12), who distinguishes the literal terrestrial pilgrim visiting a shrine from the one on the journey of life or on a personal quest into the self; see also Elsner and Rubiés (1999: especially 1–56).

gave a new twist to the metaphor: 'Then Jesus saith unto him: I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the father, but by me' (John 14:6), as Jesus himself becomes the path to tread and follow. The metaphor of life as a journey, the topos of *homo viator*, develops further through the following millennium (see for instance Ladner 1967: 233–41). Two powerful examples are Boethius's echo of Juvenal, 'You are shuddering now at the thought of a club or knife, but if you had set out on the path of life with empty pockets, you would whistle past any highway man' (Watts 1969: 68), and Dante's *Divina commedia*, the *Inferno*: canto 1:1–3, opens with:

In the middle of the journey of our life,
I came to myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost.

(Durling 1996: 26–27)

Another example, in English, might be John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, whose full title proceeds *From This World to That Which Is to Come, Delivered Under the Similitude of a Dream* (1684).

In the Spanish cultural tradition the topos is nationally encapsulated by the fifteenth-century soldier-poet Jorge Manrique (c.1440–1479) in his famous 'Coplas a/por/sobre la muerte de su padre'/'Stanzas on the Death of His Father', a landmark of Spanish literature: 'This world of ours is the pathway | that leads us to the next, our | heavenly home [literally: a dwelling place without sorrow]' (Grossman 2006: 8–9, stanza 5).⁴ In the poem this image is contrasted with another image of life: 'Our lives are the rivers | that empty into the sea | that is our dying' (Grossman 2006: 6–7, stanza 3). This evocation of the sea where all rivers necessarily flow, where any individuality is lost and annihilated, is used to evoke the topos of 'Death the Leveller' (see for instance Eire 1995: 73–75). It is a negative image which Manrique's poem rejects but which, as an image, has had a much more enduring presence in Spanish culture, alluded to even in Luis Buñuel's documentary *Las Hurdes. Tierra sin pan/Land Without Bread* (produced by Ramón Acín 1933). Without contextualization a rapidly flowing river is included in one very brief shot at a crucial turning point towards the end of *Morir en San Hilario*, and yet it figures prominently in el Piernas's final mural. As an image it is one of Heraclitus's attributed aphorisms on the theme of universal flux, that one can never step twice in the same river for other waters are continuously flowing on, thus conveying the swift passage of time with no turning back (Wheelwright 1959: 29–36, 29). An important conclusion from this brief description of the topos that life is a path and journey for *homo viator*, rather than a river which links up more negatively with Charon and the Styx, is the emphasis that there is not so much a polarity or antithesis between life and death but a continuity: life has a purpose even if this cannot be apprehended without faith or belief. Mañá's film does not, however, speculate on the particular beliefs to be accepted. In the film, Roman Catholic rites,

⁴ In 1833 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow also published a free translation of the poem as the 'Coplas de Don Jorge Manrique', printed in Boston by Allen and Ticknor.

physically represented by the church building, are the ideological references questioned by the priest's own doubt. Indeed, two-third of the way through when in the church, as Father Antonio (Juan Echanove) and Teodoro try to comment politely on the first sketch of el Piernas's mural they call it an abstract, adding that this perhaps reflects more clearly the nature of God in the modern world: an abstraction.

To return to the film's initial credit sequence, after projecting the title and cutting briefly to the breathing difficulties of an elderly passenger inside one of the carriages, the actors' names appear and the parodic mode is introduced. This is created through rapid montage, beginning with a straight cut to a high angle shot on a car arriving in an open space which cuts again onto the wheels of the car. The name of Lluís Homar, the presumed protagonist, is shown in the bottom right-hand corner and the credits continue with the close-up of a shoe and spats stepping out of the car, more shoes follow as often happens to create suspense. Although journeys can be made on foot or by any other means of transport, the car is iconic to the road film and is another generic pointer for the spectator (Laderman 2002: 13). This car and the spats locate the action in the possible late 1930s or early 1940s. The costumes, ambush, cries of betrayal, the shoot out, together with the facial close-ups on the fugitive gangster, el Piernas, all enhanced by the non-diegetic sound-track, quickly build up the impression that this is a parody of the 'prohibition' gangster movie, where the outlaw on the run and the quest overlap with road films (Laderman 2002: 20, 27ff.). The narrative will concentrate on el Piernas's personal journey and transformation within the secluded village of San Hilario but, to build up suspense and remind the spectator of the 'real' contrasting criminal world and parody, the narrative will periodically return to the police investigation and the exaggerated stereotypes of the gangsters attempting to recover the stolen money. In calling one of the gangsters 'Cráter' (Carlos Bermejo), one wonders if the parody is not further enhanced through a playful reference to and inversion of the other more competent criminal Jack Carter, as represented by Michael Cain in *Get Carter* (Hodges 1971) or by Sylvester Stallone in, the other remake of Ted Lewis's novel, *Get Carter* (Kay 2000), themselves being playful inversions of Nick Carter, the pulp fiction detective who triumphed in the 1930s and of whom a few films were made, as well as many 5¢ comics quoted visually in this film. Back to el Piernas's establishing shot, his initial characterization sets him up as the loser and idiot of the plot among the mobsters controlled by el Gordo (i.e. Fatso (Oscar Alegre)). In his gangster setting, el Piernas parallels the fool, the inept and clumsy 'paleta', as confirmed by his telephone calls to Cráter, but in San Hilario he becomes the more sophisticated and respected city man amongst the other innocent and naive fools, as he tries to run away down the street shouting that they are all mad! For those in the real and sane world he will grow into the fool who according to mediaeval tradition can nonetheless offer wisdom though irony (see for instance Welsford 1935: xi–xvii, 314–23). After his attempted escape, at first albeit in spite of himself and then reluctantly, el Piernas does become the literal and allegorical '*homo viator*', the 'stranger' in San Hilario, an 'exile' in a world so different from his own

and from the spectators, and a 'criminal' who finds 'redemption through his pilgrimage' (Holloway 1987, 5–6). He will discover and demonstrate 'that Truth sits in your heart' (Edwards 2005: 8–17, 11). This identification as *homo viator* is playfully confirmed by his name 'el Piernas', which literally translates as 'Legs', always on the run, since in Spanish the use of the definite article indicates a nickname. The name Germán Cortés that he is given in the village, albeit a case of mistaken identity, is another joke echoing the Conquistador Hernán Cortés, who came across unknown lands, as explained in the film.

In this film many of the situations and events represented, both plausible and those implausible, which can be identified as examples of magical realism, can also be understood with reference to the topos of the allegorical *homo viator* in general and more specifically to the argument and imagery used and elaborated in Jorge Manrique's poem, including the briefly evoked river.⁵ Manrique's poem presents structured reflections on life and death, formulated as a eulogy and tribute to his father Don Rodrigo Manrique, who died on 11 November 1476 at the age of 70 with a probable facial cancer growth (Domínguez 1988: 10, 157, n. 22). Manrique and Laura Mañà's reflections are separated by more than five centuries and exploit two different artistic genres, so it is not the present intention to argue that *Morir en San Hilario* is an adaptation of Manrique's 'Coplas'/'Stanzas' but to point out ideological echoes, inescapable for one who knows both works. Laura Mañà presents her own meditation, updating the enduring traditional topos, and thus also combining 'originality with tradition', which is the title and argument of Pedro Salinas's study of the poem (Salinas 1947). For instance the universal *ubi sunt* topos, developed by Manrique with reference to recent political figures and other individuals with the lengthy anaphora 'Where now is [...]' and 'Where now are [...]' rounded off with 'Where shall we go to find them? | What were they but fleeting dewdrops | in the fields' (Grossman 2006: 18–23, stanza 16–19), is paralleled in the film through the presence of framed photographs commemorating past funerals, hanging on the hotel walls. It is also echoed through the visual reference to the more contemporary song 'Where have all the flowers gone? | Long time passing [...]' (Pete Seeger 1955) by introducing Berta (Rita Terranova), who looks after the Good Hope Hotel, Hotel Buena Esperanza, and whose tears, as they fall on the ground or by the graves in the cemetery, bring forth flowers the next morning. This is a good example of magical realism: because no one weeps at a happy San Hilario funeral, Berta's tears are shown on three occasions metamorphosed from dewdrops into flowers for the dead. Teodoro claims there is nothing depressing in helping others to be happy when they die and their life is fulfilled.

The two meditations begin by establishing the fear of dying as a consequence of perceiving death as the negation of life. This is true especially for those who live perilously by violence and thus engrossed in the minutiae of surviving, as Seneca put it (Basore 1932: 315), enduring the anxieties experienced

⁵ Manrique's poem has inspired many commentaries; two fundamental accounts are by the poet Pedro Salinas (1947) and the academic Nicholas Round (1985).

by the soldiers in Manrique's poem: 'What is the use? | When you, Death, arrive with rage, | and strike to pierce neatly through all | with your arrow' (Alda Tesán 1977: 156, vv. 285–88).⁶ So it is for el Piernas as he runs away from the opening ambush and stows away on the train seen during the initial credit sequence, in a freight wagon appropriately carrying pigs, which get the better of him even though they are being sent to the slaughter house; at first he fears greatly for his life, as Manrique puts it,

Tell me, Death, where do you hide | and move them to? | And their glorious deeds | achieved in wars | and at peace, | when you, cruel, rip loose | and with force bring them down | to be destroyed.

(Alda Tesán 1977: 155, vv. 269–76)⁷

Too busy checking over his shoulder to protect his back and his US dollars, el Piernas is on the run, living the life of fear, full of threats and dangers, pursued by the police and his own criminal mob whose headquarters are concealed behind the cold storage room of a slaughter house. This is the setting evoked in Manrique's stanza 13, full of ambushes and traps:

The glittering grand life that | we live here, | what are they but speeding racers | and death the snare, the ambush | where we fall? | Not thinking of traps, of danger, | we run as fast as we can, | without pause; | but when we see the deception | and want to change our course, it | is too late.

(Grossman 2006: 16–17, stanza 13)⁸

Set on this course, hiding in the village to protect his life, el Piernas is at first oblivious of the fact that it is his funeral that is being prepared, consequence of the mistaken identity with the expected painter, Germán Cortés, who died on the train making its way to San Hilario at the beginning of the film. This generates the humorous situational and verbal irony that permeates el Piernas's exchanges with the villagers, who take it for granted that he had actually planned to come to them in order to die. A third into the film, awaiting his rescue and feeling a little safer on his second day in San Hilario, outside the bar-café el Piernas finally sees the notice that Germán Cortés has thirteen days left until his death. The realization that it is his own funeral that is being organized leads him to start fearing again and he runs back to the hotel to telephone Cráter and el Gordo to bring forward his getaway. Until transport arrives and he is rescued from this impossible situation, 'You live in an incredible town!' which Teodoro takes as a compliment, el Piernas will temporarily exploit the situation and mistaken identity as a means of cover from the police, who are also after him and the stolen money.⁹

⁶ This stanza 24 omitted by Grossman is my own translation from the original (Alda Tesán 1977: 156), and it should be noted that the poem develops military images to suggest the perils of life, but these references are not always so evident in the translation.

⁷ This original stanza 23 (Alda Tesán 1977: 155) is also omitted from Grossman's translation.

⁸ The 'speeding racers' / *corredores* are in fact the scouts in the vanguard that precede the troops.

⁹ The translations are those of the DVD's subtitle.

However, remaining in San Hilario gradually leads to changing priorities for el Piernas, and he slowly begins to reflect attitudes also highlighted and valued in Jorge Manrique's poem. Firstly there is the slow appreciation that worldly goods and material wealth, his sack full of US dollars, are of no real use. This is humorously demonstrated when he plays poker late into the night with his new friends, and he realizes no one is worried by the rules of the game or actually concerned because they are losing money; they are gambling as if with Monopoly money. He will gradually stop worrying, hiding and caring about his dollars, as he eventually realizes that, according to Manrique's verses, 'See what little value | lies in the things we strive for | and pursue, | for in this world of deceit, | even before we perish | they are lost [...]' (Grossman 2006: 10–11, stanza 8). So that at the end, as his relationship develops with Esther, the village seamstress (Ana Fernández), he returns the money without any regrets but gets shot in the back when he makes his way back on foot to the village. Prompted by Teodoro, he also comes to appreciate that other things matter more: for instance finding a purpose for his life, a goal, and living every moment to the full, aware that it may be the last. For the people of San Hilario this goal and purpose is preparing a memorable funeral to celebrate a life not to be forgotten; for el Piernas this goal becomes painting the mural in the village church, which was the true Germán Cortés's last wish. At first it was only to keep up the deception that he is the painter, and thus continue to hide in the village; later he accepts the mural as his own personal goal and teleology. He concludes with a mural that celebrates the village and its own teleology, including within its frame his own most recent fulfilling experiences. In Manrique's poem the importance of finding a purpose in life is established with reference to his own fifteenth-century values, being a good Christian soldier: 'He was an Aurelius Severus Alexander | in his discipline and application | in war' (vv. 331–37, my translation), 'He did not leave vast treasures | he did not achieve great riches, | immense wealth, | but he waged wars against Moors' (Grossman 2006: 26–27, stanza 28–29).

For el Piernas this required a total change of attitude and to recreate himself. In San Hilario he also learns the value of friendship, first with Teodoro, and then with the other villagers, sealed after the drunken poker game in the bar, as Manrique writes, 'What a friend he was to friends!' (Grossman 2006: 24–25, stanza 26). The all important catalyst to this change was falling in love and finding his Platonic Lady, the woman who motivates and inspires. Teodoro describes Esther as she who hears the last secrets of the dying, thus accompanying them to their death and transformation. From the first moment that el Piernas sees Esther, coinciding with his first arrival at the church to start on the mural, the non-diegetic soundtrack, the extended medium shots and the reverse shots establish that he has felt something, fallen in love, and that she too has been affected in a situation that occurs twice. At first he misunderstands their mutual attraction and tries to seduce her, a moment that affects their relationship and greatly upsets Esther's son (Milton de la Canal). Through his persevering and more caring involvement with Esther, he gradually comes to appreciate the difference between chasing an object of sexual

desire and genuine personal relationships.¹⁰ Furthermore as he gets to know her son Pablo and shares activities with him, el Piernas learns to think beyond his own self-interest. He first tries to teach Pablo to defend himself on his callipers and then makes him a pair of stilts (!) so that Pablo can be accepted by the other children rather than be the object of their bullying. This allows the threesome to enjoy each other's company on their own among the hills, beyond the confines of the village, as well as to remember Pablo's deceased father, in visual compositions that recall the Holy Family (76 mm; Figure 2).¹¹ The importance of the family, whether traditional or reconstructed in the case of Esther and Pablo, is also glorified at the end of the Manrique poem: 'And so with this understanding, | and with all human senses | still preserved, | surrounded by his wife, | his children, brothers, sisters, | and his servants, | he gave up his soul to the One' (Grossman 2006: 34–35, stanza 40).¹²



Figure 3: El Piernas, Pablo and Esther.

The evolution of the mural acts as a useful objective correlative with el Piernas's journey, his development, transformation and self-fulfilment. When he first takes on the task, as mentioned above in order to protect his false identity, he

¹⁰ The relationship as viewed from Esther's perspective makes a very interesting narrative: her profession as seamstress like a modern Penelope awaiting for an Odysseus to return, her possible necrophiliac tendencies and her own scars, physical and allegorical, another example of magical realism, concealing a difficult past only alluded to in the film.

¹¹ This is an image and device also used by Bergman in *The Seventh Seal*. In Mañà's film Pablo even wears angel wings, which he then lends to el Piernas.

¹² See Rutherford's (2010) Ph.D. thesis, which examines and discusses the various family structures possible since Spain recovered its democracy.

does not even know what a mural is. He has, furthermore, no personal memories that he can draw upon for his painting except perhaps how el Flaco, Skinny, was disposed of by el Gordo's men. Rummaging through Germán Cortés's trunk and belongings, he discovers a sketch book with drawings of houses which the painter had done as a 6-year-old. He also leafs through one of Germán's books, *Pintores inolvidables/Unforgettable Painters*, where he sees the reproduction of an impressionist's self-portrait beside his easel and wearing a large beret. The next morning to make his start on the mural, and thus preserve his false identity, el Piernas shaves his moustache and changes his clothes. Furthermore he also puts on a beret like the painter's, and thus matches Teodoro, who wears his own beret – so the two consolidate their friendship with a conspiratorial shot/reverse shot. His first attempt is to paint a house, so badly that Teodoro and Father Antonio called it an abstract painting to spare his feelings, but these brush strokes are significant because he may have been subconsciously trying to paint what was really missing from his life: a home and a family. The second time he returns to the mural, there is still no genuine commitment on his part and Teodoro takes over the painting until Esther walks back into the church, but the two friends have held an important conversation about life and its relationship to death. El Piernas attitude is changing, and the third time the mural is shown, he has completed three abstract compositions reminiscent of Joan Miró's style, perhaps as a means of attracting Esther's attention.¹³ However, this third attempt is being blotted out by the angry and disappointed Pablo after he has seen el Piernas force himself on his mother. El Piernas subsequently obliterates these compositions, this time with determination and purpose, and again with a blue wash, as if washing the wall clean. During his last few days in San Hilario as his relationship with Esther and her son blossoms he builds up happy memories to inspire his mural.

Following the fireworks rehearsal for his funeral, he makes a completely new start to what will be the definitive version: a mother with baby in arms, to which he adds a large tear below the mother's right eye, and then a young boy with angel wings holding the mother's hand, again representing his unspoken aspirations and dreams. The style of the new mural appears to be influenced by Teodoro's own paintings, which in turn can be identified as reflecting Franz Roh's definition of visual Magic Realism as explained by Irene Guenther (Zamora and Faris 1995: 15–73). Intercut with el Piernas's brush strokes is a shot of a happy Pablo now the centre of attention on his new stilts, and of a very moved Esther praying in church, moving closer and closer to the mural. From there on the mural will be filled with visual reminders of el Piernas's most recent fulfilling experiences in the village and even anticipate his own cortège (Figure 3). As el Piernas looks round from his mural to look at Esther, who has by now moved from the altar to pray in front of the painter and his work, the low-key light on the side of el Piernas's face close to his

¹³ Ms Beatriz Tadeo Fuica has a persuasive interpretation linking el Piernas's experimental mural with Joan Miró's paintings, which she identified as 'Vuelo de pájaros' (1941) and 'La luna verde' (1972). It is to be hoped that she will find time to write up and publish her hypothesis.

‘mother and children’, together with the deep focus and selective lighting on the two-dimensional painting behind him, makes him very much part of his mural.



Figure 3 – The Mural.

After his silent meditation by the flowing river, reflecting on his own mortality, painting the mural has become personally meaningful for him; it is no longer a cover for his criminal identity but a celebration of his new attitude to life. Hence the ‘holy family’ sequence in the hills dissolves into the mural being painted. He has accepted Teodoro’s obvious reflection on life: ‘Everyone has to die. Dying is hereditary’, so why deny or fear it? By this stage he has also stopped living engrossed in his own immediate preoccupations (Basore 1932: 315), and when Esther measures him for his funeral suit he has learnt that one need no longer fear to be surprised by Death, recalling the ‘I don’t want death to surprise me’ from the pre-initial-credit sequence. He has accepted death as part of the natural cycle, not a negation but one of the different stages of a meaningful life, as Manrique advises, ‘Do not think of it as bitter, | the dreadful, dire battle | that awaits you’ (Grossman 2006: 30–31, stanza 35). A death should be celebrated and remembered, not to be wasted. El Piernas has found time and the conviction to do something worthwhile and of quality, that does not necessarily bring with it material rewards, whereas before his attitude exemplified another of Teodoro’s paradoxes that the fear of death prevents us from achieving as much. Teodoro is the eternal optimist who has so much still to do that he must keep putting off his suicide, as he adds new items to his list of things to do in order to fulfil himself.¹⁴ Teodoro evokes others who also came to San Hilario to fulfil themselves and their dreams, like Pablo’s father, Esther’s husband, the aviator with angel wings. The aviator’s wings are those of an

¹⁴ As Dr Belén Vidal pointed out, the ‘list of things to do’ is also important to Coixet’s *My Life Without Me* (2003), and implicit in Laura Mañà’s recent comedy *La vida empieza hoy/Life Begins Today* (2010), where the Town Council puts on free sexual education classes for its senior citizens.

angel on Pablo, and become those of a fallen angel for el Piernas with the possible threat of becoming Icarus wings. All have left memories, and el Piernas will be remembered by his mural, the work of art that transcends mortality. The completed mural is never shown in the film, but this is not important. The mural was a means to Piernas's transformation and acceptance of death, not an end itself. As for *homo viator*, in this phenomenological world the conscious journey matters more than its destination; it is the quality of life that matters, not its length.

Another important overlap between Jorge Manrique and Laura Mañà is the depiction of the swift passage of time. For Jorge Manrique this is achieved by the manipulation of verb tenses:

If we look upon the present | and see how in a moment | it is done, | [...] we
will deem the yet-to-come | as past and gone. | Oh, let no man be deceived
| and think that what he hopes for | will endure | longer than what has
gone by, | for all things are bound to pass | as they did before.

(Grossman 2006: 4–5, stanza 2)

Laura Mañà and Bernat Vilaplana, the film's editor, convey this through the use of fades to black and dissolves, repeating brief links of el Piernas going to bed or waking up, and the use of five rising orange suns to identify five different days, each time showing the sun in a slightly higher position on the horizon, then increasing briefer sequences as the narrative develops, with rapid editing, parallel montage, slightly dislocating and syncopating the chronology in the last 30 minutes of the film, which logically cover a number of days so that the funeral can take place on day 14 of the film's narrative. Examples of other strategies are the broken clock and the lack of radio news or news papers, since information is brought to the bar on bicycle by the postman Rafael (Martín Pavlosky).

The swift passage of time is balanced in both works by the important value placed on memory: 'These old stories of his | which he defined with his strong arm | in his youth, | with other new victories | he now renewed | in his old age' (Alda Tesán 1977: 159, vv. 361–64).¹⁵ The village lives with the memory of those for whom the celebrations were organized and, as already mentioned, on the hotel walls hang numerous framed photographs of previous commemorations. Esther and her son stroll through the cemetery talking about the departed, and she tells Pablo that 'the dead live [on] in our memories', and so she helps him recall their achievements and their funeral. El Piernas will also transcend his brief stay in San Hilario through Art with his mural on the church wall, thus recalling the title of Germán Cortés's book found in the trunk.¹⁶ Memories are also a consolation for Jorge Manrique's family, 'Though he is dead, | his memory lives on to | comfort us' (Grossman 2006: 36–37, stanza 40).

¹⁵ Also omitted from Grossman, this is my own translation of stanza 31 from the original (Alda Tesán 1977: 159).

¹⁶ 'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, | So long lives this and this gives life to thee' (Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII).

Since the cemetery is the origin and heart of the village, in the Hotel Buena Esperanza the room in which el Piernas is lodged, which is number 13, is the best because of its view over the cemetery. The cemetery is the perfect *memento mori* which urges us to live a full life and, as Berta states in the same scene, the cemetery 'is our past, our present, and our future'. Within it, all the crosses are the same, the opportunity to espouse this attitude is available to all and any. This also brings to mind the topos of 'Death the Leveller': citizen, artist or criminal, all receive the same care, attention and cross, in San Hilario. As Doña Rosita (María Elena Rúa), who runs the café-bar, pleads when they share the money purloined by Mariano from the gangsters' sack, in this town the dead are all equal, neither rich nor poor.¹⁷ This is echoed by Mariano when the police want to prevent the celebration of el Piernas's funeral and he states that death wipes out all injustices and it is the same for all, rich, poor, intellectuals or idiots. Jorge Manrique expressed the same topos through his metaphor that our lives are rivers that flow to the sea: 'There flow the mightiest rivers, | and the others, tributaries | and lesser streams, | joined together and equal | are those who live by their labor | and wealthy men' (Grossman 2006: 6–7, stanza 3, and consider as well stanzas 14–24, pp. 16–24). Death is the great leveller of differences.

The narrative is divided into three parts: the flight of the gangster and his hiding in San Hilario. A third of the way through, el Piernas realizes that the villagers are preparing for his funeral in thirteen days' time and this shatters his confidence as the film now builds up his fear of death. With the third dawn, almost two-third through the film, the transformation of the fool begins as he finally decides on a suitable subject for his mural, thus accepting and appreciating his situation. In fact el Piernas gradually acknowledges his fate in very different circumstances but with the same resignation and equanimity as Don Rodrigo Manrique's 'and I consent to my dying | and submit to a desire | bright and pure; | it is madness for a man | to wish to live when God wishes | him to die' (Grossman 2006: 32–35, stanza 38). Subsequently, el Piernas receives his last phone call – Cráter will finally pick him up the following night at kilometre 24. This time he is hesitant and indeed reluctant to leave the village in order to return to the 'real' world, the parody of the gangster movie. He considers his situation and options by the river, whose rapid flow is accentuated by the loud soundtrack. He finds it difficult to write his farewell message to Esther before he puts on his gangster outfit. The body of the real Germán Cortés has arrived as el Piernas leaves clutching his jute sack, as if an echo of the sack that keeps recurring in Luis Buñuel's films, as if containing all sorts of worries and emotional problems. The new relationships el Piernas has just established are too strong and have affected him greatly, so he plans to leave the money with Cráter and return to the village. He does not, however, know that Mariano has replaced the dollars with strips of paper. When el Piernas leaves the sack in Cráter's car and walks away, Cráter checks the contents and concludes that

¹⁷ In keeping with the film's humour, this democratic statement is balanced with humour as the scene in question echoes the venality of the islanders in *Whisky Galore* (MacKendrick 1949) or *¡Bienvenido Mister Marshall!*/Welcome Mr Marshall (Berlanga 1953).

he has been double-crossed. As el Piernas resolutely and fearlessly walks back towards San Hilario, Cráter shoots him in the back. El Piernas makes it to his hotel room and, his wound bandaged, he receives Extreme Unction from Father Antonio, but ironically it is he who offers comfort to the doubting priest. Meanwhile Esther is distraught when she finds el Piernas's discarded message and concludes that until the day before she loved a man who left her to carry on with his life, thinking he is running away and not facing up to his commitments. The pathetic fallacy then asserts itself as a storm breaks when Esther arrives to dress him for his funeral procession and undresses to lie down beside him. The close-up on el Piernas's face, wearing a gentle smile, then dissolves to show him walk alone and naked through the cemetery into the redemptive rain, as if it were washing him free of all his imperfections.¹⁸ The scene suggests that his soul is leaving his body behind, and is also consistent as a dream or vision within the magical-realist narrative, thus making no actual assertion as to what really lies beyond this moment. There is peace on el Piernas's face, as if echoing the resignation implicit in Jorge Manrique's simple statements, in contrast to the tropes and rhetoric of the whole poem, introducing his father's last moments: 'After his memorable feats, | his memorable deeds, too many | to recount, | on his estate in Ocaña | Death came for him, Death came knocking | on his door' (Grossman 2006: 28–29, stanza 33). This is a statement of el Piernas's transformation from life into death. The spectators are not shown how or when he closes his eyes beside Esther, but the screen fades to black, the final credits run and the soundtrack carries on playing the celebrations of his funeral with humour and the exaggerations expected from the magical-realist mode, concluding with the announcement that the following week the real Germán Cortés's life will also be commemorated with a similar fanfare and more fireworks, in order to leave more good memories behind with the audience's chuckle at the dialogue over the credits on a black screen.

Morir en San Hilario is a reflective film with a universal appeal. The present contribution does not claim that it was inspired by a fifteenth-century poem, rather that with their overlaps Mañà and Manrique are both reiterating, each for their own age and each with great originality, basic human anxieties discussed long before they each started thinking about them. Pedro Salinas's shrewd study of Jorge Manrique's poem 'Tradition and Originality' can be seen to apply just as well to Laura Mañà: traditional values are presented in an engaging and original manner. Secularized and displaced, el Piernas journey follows 'the mediaeval conception of *homo viator*, of the wayfarer in a strange world, who is also a pilgrim towards the divine order' (Ladner 1967: 256). A good 'Ars moriendi' should in fact be an 'Ars vivendi'. El Piernas's journey offers those spectators who are willing to see it

¹⁸ Professor Evans reminded me of the similar redemptive scene at the end of *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont 1994). The spiritually cleansing power of water is, like the journey, another universal symbol evident for instance from Asian New Year celebrations, the river Ganges and Christian baptism; or in the words of the final chapter of *The Revelations of St John the Divine*: 'And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb' (22: 1).

reflections on living well, making a good journey whatever the destination. It is not the length of our life but its quality that matters, the fulfilment of a worthwhile ambition.¹⁹ El Piernas comforts the Priest with the optimistic, and yet ironic, aphorism that 'what awaits after death must be wonderful, that's why no one comes back'.²⁰

The journey begins where it concludes, in an unidentified village built around a cemetery; in that sense the journey is circular and death at the centre. However, as well as the present serious meditation on the subject of life and death, it is imperative to recall the humorous tone of the film, its delicate use of irony, its witty script, its visual gags, the balanced understated acting and the farce, the subtle visual conclusion, and the narrative mode of magical realism, exaggerations and excess. But then there is no point in spelling out the obvious: the spectator is to accept all the optimism expected from a comedy's conclusion to enhance its reflections.

Author's note

Studies in European Cinema's editorial policy is to publish quotations in English, if necessary placing original quotations in footnotes.

Acknowledgements

Dr H. Partzsch, Dr B. Vidal and Professor O. Evans for their suggestions after reading draft typescripts.

Castelao Producciones SL/Filmax for copyright permission to include the three stills.

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¹⁹ As Professor Nigel Dennis and Dr Gustavo San Román commented, the values highlighted above are not that different from those put forward by the Humanist Association, <http://www.humanism.org.uk/about>. Accessed 11 December 2010.

²⁰ The last version of the mural shown includes a black figure in the sky which my colleague Dr David Martin Jones interprets as an icon of Death, the Grim Reaper; my reading is that it represents Father Antonio realizing his dream of resolving his doubts.

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Suggested citation

Bentley, B. P. E. (2012), 'The "Ars vivendi" of Laura Mañà's *Morir en San Hilario/To Die in San Hilario* (2005)', *Studies in European Cinema*, 9: 1, pp. 7–22, doi: 10.1386/seci.9.1.7_1

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